

Executive Summary

Introduction

The Proposed Resource Management Plan (RMP) and Final Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) describes and analyzes alternatives for the future management of public lands and resources administered by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), Bakersfield Field Office, located in southern-central California. The Planning Area encompasses about 17 million acres throughout Kings, San Luis Obispo, Santa Barbara, Tulare, Ventura, Madera, eastern Fresno, and western Kern Counties. Stretching from the coastal islands in the Pacific Ocean across the Central Valley to the crest of the Sierra Nevada Range, public lands are scattered across the Planning Area in numerous small parcels. With a variety of settings and landforms, this is a region of diverse topography and landscapes, and extraordinary biodiversity. Elevations range from sea level to more than 14,500 feet at Mount Whitney. The BLM Bakersfield FO is directly responsible for the management of approximately 400,000 acres of public land and 1.2 million acres of Federal mineral estate (i.e., the Decision Area).

Revising existing land use plans is a major federal action for the BLM. The National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA), as amended, requires federal agencies to prepare an EIS for major federal actions; thus, this Proposed RMP and Final EIS is a combined document. The Final EIS analyzes the impacts of five alternative RMPs for the Decision Area, including the No Action Alternative (Alternative A) and the Proposed Plan Alternative (Alternative B). The No Action Alternative reflects current management under the existing land use plan. The analysis considers a range of alternatives that provide for various levels of physical, biological, and heritage resource protection as well as opportunities for motorized and non-motorized recreational activities, leasing and development of mineral resources, livestock grazing, and other land use activities.

Purpose and Need

The Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA), requires developing, maintaining, and, as appropriate, revising land use plans for public lands. BLM-administered lands within the Planning Area are currently managed according to the 1997 Caliente RMP and 1984 Hollister RMP. Since the Record of Decisions (RODs) for these existing plans, new data has become available and laws, regulations, and policies regarding management of these public lands have changed. In addition, decisions in the existing plan do not satisfactorily address all new and emerging issues and lands acquired after the completion of the previous plans. These changes and potential deficiencies created the need to revise the existing plan. The Bakersfield Field Office RMP revision is anticipated to be completed by September 2012.

The purpose, or goal, of the RMP is to ensure lands administered by the BLM are managed in accordance with the FLPMA and the principles of multiple use and sustained yield. The reason for revising the existing plan is to address the changes occurring in the Planning Area and to select a future management strategy that best achieves a combination of the following elements:

- Employ a community-based planning approach to collaborate with federal, state, and local agencies.

- Establish goals and objectives for managing resources and resource uses in the approximately 400,000 surface acres and 1.2 million acres of federal mineral estate in the Decision Area in accordance with the principles of multiple use and sustained yield.
- Identify land use plan decisions to guide future land-management actions and subsequent site-specific implementation decisions.
- Identify management actions and allowable uses anticipated to achieve the established goals and objectives and reach desired outcomes.
- Provide comprehensive management direction by making land use decisions for all appropriate resources and resource uses administered by the Bakersfield Field Office.
- Provide for compliance with applicable tribal, federal, and state laws, standards, and implementation plans, and BLM policies and regulations.
- Recognize the Nation's need for domestic sources of minerals and renewable energy, and incorporate requirements of the Energy Policy Act of 2005 (Public Law 109-58).
- Retain flexibility to adapt to new and emerging issues and opportunities and to provide for adjustments to decisions over time based on new information and monitoring.

Strive to be compatible with the plans and policies of adjacent local, state, tribal, and federal agencies and consistent with federal law, regulations, and BLM policy.

Public Involvement and Agency Cooperation

The intent of the scoping process is to provide an opportunity for the public, tribes, government agencies, and interest groups to participate in determining the scope and issues to be addressed by alternatives and analyses in the planning process and the EIS. In general, public involvement assists the agency by broadening the information base for decision making, disseminating information to the public about the RMP and EIS, and ensuring that public needs and viewpoints are brought to the attention of the BLM.

Although scoping comments were accepted and incorporated up until November 10, 2010, the formal scoping period was from March 4, 2008 to May 3, 2008. The BLM solicited written comments on the RMP revision process, issues, and impacts and held a series of seven public meetings in the Planning Area, additional meetings we're held in 2009 to update the public on the planning process and garner additional resource specific information. The BLM structured the meetings in an open house format, with resource specialists and other representatives of the BLM on hand to personally address questions and provide information to meeting participants.

Public participation was ongoing throughout the planning process. The Proposed RMP and Final EIS considered all substantive oral and written comments received during the 90-day public comment period for the Draft RMP and Draft EIS, which occurred between September 9, 2011 and December 9, 2011. Members of the public, with standing, have the opportunity to protest the land use planning level decisions made by the Proposed RMP and Final EIS during the specified 30-day protest period. In addition, the public will have the opportunity to appeal on implementation level decisions after the ROD has been issued. The ROD will be issued by the BLM after the release of the Proposed RMP and Final EIS, the Governor's Consistency Review, and protest resolution.

Issues Addressed

Planning issues identified through the scoping process and other public outreach efforts focus on the demands, concerns, conflicts, or problems associated with use or management of public lands and resources in the Decision Area. Key planning issues within the scope of the EIS are used to develop alternatives or are otherwise addressed in the EIS. The main issues described and analyzed in the EIS include the following:

Issue 1: *Adequately address the need for access to, and continued availability of, public lands for multiple recreational uses and open spaces.*

Issue 2: *Establish a balance between the extent of the travel network and the protection of natural and cultural resources including an appropriate allocation of routes to the various modes of transport.*

Issue 3: *Ensure appropriate protection for Threatened and Endangered species, critical habitat, other biological resources, and cultural and paleontological resources in a multiple-use environment.*

Issue 4: *Continue to appropriately manage livestock grazing to provide for economic benefit, rural lifestyles and vegetation management while protecting other resources.*

Issue 5: *Balance the demand for energy development (including oil and gas, wind, and solar energy) and other land use authorizations (such as road and transmission corridor rights-of-way) with other resource values.*

Issue 6: *Address the impacts of climate change on the management of public lands, including strategies that will reduce impacts and incorporate appropriate monitoring.*

Alternatives Considered in Detail

To comply with NEPA requirements in the development of alternatives for this RMP and EIS, the BLM sought public input and analyzed a reasonable range of alternatives, including a No Action Alternative (Alternative A). The BLM conducted a series of workshops with an Interdisciplinary Team comprised of BLM specialists and local, state, and federal agency representatives. The BLM formulated four additional alternatives (B thru E) that reflect a range of resource use and conservation. Following analysis all alternatives the Interdisciplinary Team provided recommendations for selecting the Proposed Plan Alternative (Alternative B). The Proposed Plan Alternative does not represent a final BLM decision and could change between publication of the Proposed RMP and Final EIS and Approved RMP and ROD based on any protests that may be received. The BLM will make its final decision after any protest resolution, and will document its decision in a ROD.

Including the No Action Alternative (Alternative A), the five alternatives analyzed in this Final EIS represent differing approaches to managing resources and resource uses in the Decision Area.

Each alternative comprises two categories of land use planning decisions: (1) desired outcomes (goals and objectives) and (2) allowable uses and management actions.

Goals and objectives direct BLM actions to most effectively meet legal mandates, regulations, and agency policy, as well as local and regional resource needs. Goals are broad statements of desired outcomes that are usually not quantifiable. Objectives identify more specific desired outcomes for

resources and might include a measurable component. Objectives are generally expected to achieve the stated goals. Allowable uses are a category of land use decisions that identify where specific land uses are allowed, restricted, or excluded on BLM-administered lands and federal mineral estate in the Decision Area. Management actions are proactive measures (for example, measures the BLM will implement to enhance watershed function and condition), or limitations intended to guide BLM activities. Allowable uses often contain a spatial component because the alternatives identify whether particular land uses are allowed, restricted, or excluded. Alternatives may include specific management actions to meet goals and objectives and may exclude certain land uses to protect resource values.

Alternative A continues current management practices as the No Action alternative required by NEPA. This alternative would continue current management under the existing 1997 Caliente RMP and 1984 Hollister RMP, as amended. Management of resources and sensitive habitats would remain at current levels but would not address emerging issues concerning public lands. This alternative also would not address the use of lands acquired after the signing of these RODs, including public lands at Atwell Island, Piedras Blancas Light Station, and portions of the San Joaquin River Gorge. When no specific management actions are described in the No Action alternative, management of lands and resources has been guided by BLM policy and interim management strategies.

Alternative B (Proposed Plan) balances resource conservation and ecosystem health with the production of commodities and public use of the land. This alternative provides opportunities to produce commodities from natural resources and to use the land for public purposes on a sustainable basis while maintaining important ecological, cultural, and recreational values. This alternative includes changes made as a result of public comment and internal review on the Draft RMP/Draft EIS.

Alternative C emphasizes conserving cultural and natural resources, maintaining functioning natural systems, and restoring natural systems that are degraded. Management would focus on protecting sensitive resources through greater limitation of resource uses.

Alternative D mimics Alternative C in all aspects except livestock grazing. This alternative eliminates livestock grazing from the public lands for the life of the plan where the Bakersfield RMP provides administrative direction for the livestock grazing program.

Alternative E emphasizes the production of natural resources commodities and public use opportunities. Resource uses such as recreation, livestock grazing, mining, and oil/gas leasing, consistent with BLM guidance and constraints, would be emphasized. Potential impacts on sensitive resources would be mitigated on a case-by-case basis.

Environmental Consequences

The purpose of the environmental consequences analysis is to determine the potential impacts of the federal action under each of the five alternatives on the human environment, while focusing on key planning issues identified by the BLM and established during the scoping process. The analysis of environmental consequences is arranged by the following program areas: Resources, Resource Uses, Special Designations and Social and Economic Considerations.

Resources

The analysis shows that all of the action alternatives result in reductions of PM₁₀ emissions primarily in the San Joaquin Valley and East Kern Planning Areas; these reductions are consistent with the State Implementation Plans (SIP) and represent conformity. Ozone precursor emissions would increase slightly under all alternatives, but this increase represents less than 0.09% of the regional emissions inventory. Emissions of all pollutants of concern within the Planning Area have been demonstrated to be less than *de minimus* levels in the San Joaquin Valley for both ozone precursor emissions, all of the SIP requirements for the six federal nonattainment/maintenance areas are met by all alternatives.

Alternative A would be the least protective of natural and cultural resources allowing for the largest area available for surface disturbing activities and incompatible uses. Alternatives C and D would be the most restrictive of surface disturbing and incompatible uses; Alternative D would further eliminate the direct impacts of livestock grazing, however, implementation of this exclusion would have its own set of impacts resulting from the need to restrict livestock from public lands (e.g. fencing of private lands) to prevent unauthorized grazing. Alternative B would provide additional protection for approximately one-half of the federally listed species known or with potential to occur in the Decision Area and generally reduce the impacts of motorized routes on both biological and cultural resources.

Prescriptive management of lands identified as having wilderness characteristics in Alternative B would provide protection for 21% of the lands with wilderness characteristics outside of Wilderness and Wilderness Study Areas. Other compatible designations would protect an additional 24% of these lands. Wilderness characteristics would not receive any compatible management on the remaining areas and could potentially be subject to loss. Alternatives C and D would protect all lands with wilderness characteristics through prescriptive management. Whereas, Alternatives A and E would not provide for the protection of any lands with wilderness characteristics outside of Wilderness and Wilderness Study Areas.

The greatest protection for visual resources would be provided under Alternatives B, C, and D because the existing visual conditions are maintained or managed as a higher VRM Class. Alternative E would manage the largest area that allows for major modifications to the existing visual condition. Alternative A would not provide VRM guidance at the landscape level; relying on project specific interim management of visual resources, which could result in undesirable visual contrast with the existing landscape.

Resource Uses

There is little difference between the alternatives concerning the designation of OHV Closed Areas, however, travel opportunities and the potential for the travel network to increase would be most limited in Alternatives C and D. Route designations within the alternatives range from a sizeable increase in the amount of routes designated for motorized use in Alternatives A, B and E; whereas, Alternatives C and D would result in a notable decrease from the existing travel network.

Alternative A focuses on land disposal actions and would ultimately result in a net loss of public lands and federal mineral estate. Conversely, the action alternatives are retention oriented. The action alternatives would increase the areas either totally excluding ROWs or implementing additional restrictions to their siting. Alternatives C and D apply the greatest area limitations and, therefore, have the largest impact to land use authorizations, including utility scale renewable energy projects.

The allocation of currently unallocated lands would result in a marginal increase in livestock grazing opportunity in Alternatives B, C, and E. Alternative D would eliminate livestock grazing from public lands in the decision area for the life of the plan, however, the connected actions associated with the implementation of this alternative would be impracticable.

All alternatives continue fluid mineral development opportunities at or near current levels, especially given consideration of historic use patterns and the reasonably foreseeable development outside of producing oil fields. Under Alternatives C and D there would be a total elimination of solid leasable mineral development opportunity whilst the remaining alternatives continue to provide opportunity commensurate to the current condition. Overall there is marginal difference between the alternatives in their reduction of locatable development opportunities in areas with potential for these minerals. There is, however, a substantial reduction in opportunity for salable mineral developments in all action alternatives.

Alternative A would result in the least restrictions to specific recreational opportunities and the maintenance of existing access opportunities; however, it would not outline sufficient guidance for the adequate management of recreation. The action alternatives increase the level of opportunity specific restrictions including the largest areas of public closure under Alternatives C and D. Generally, there is little difference between the areas managed for recreation across the action alternatives (acres of SRMA/ERMA); however, the focus switches between intensive SRMA and moderate ERMA styles of management: most intensive management in Alternative E.

Special Designations

Alternatives C and D protect the largest area through designation as ACECs, primarily to maintain and enhance biological resource values. Relevant values would be at greatest risk from degradation under Alternative A, which would protect the smallest acreage and apply minimal special management to achieve ACEC objectives.

Alternatives B, C, and D eliminate the only Back Country Byway from the Decision Area. Alternatives A and E continue the designation of the Chimney Peak Byway with the latter providing guidance that would improve opportunities and experiences along the route.

Alternative B would find two segments of rivers suitable for inclusion in the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System. The remaining six rivers would no longer receive interim management; however, impacts to their outstandingly remarkable values would be unlikely because of overlapping special management provided by ACEC designations or area of ecological importance and SRMA prescriptive management. Alternatives C and D would find all eight river segments suitable and, therefore, continue protection. Alternatives A and E would find no segments suitable.

Social and Economic Considerations

None of the alternatives would be expected to reduce economic diversity (the number of economic sectors) or increase economic dependency, which occurs when the local economy is dominated by a limited number of industries. Shifts in emphasis could occur, but these would not result as a consequence of planning actions in this Proposed RMP/Final EIS. While the alternatives have the potential to affect local businesses and individuals, the relative contribution of BLM-related activities to the local economy and the relative differences between the alternatives would not be large enough to have any measurable effect on economic diversity or dependency.

All alternatives could result in increases in employment and labor income relative to current conditions over the next decade, from which minority and low income populations may benefit. As noted above, access for recreation and other uses would be accommodated under all the alternatives. In addition, access to traditional materials and cultural sites will continue to provide valuable resources to communities in the area; sustaining lifestyles, traditions, ceremonies and the heritage that remain an important part of community lifestyle, rural character and quality of life.

The Next Steps

BLM planning regulations provide for a formal protest of planning decisions contained in the Proposed RMP/Final EIS by those meeting certain criteria. Protests must be filed within 30 days of the date the notice of availability of this document published in the Federal Register, as outlined in 43 Code of Federal Regulations section 1610.5-2.

Upon resolution of all planning decision protests, the BLM will issue and sign an Approved Bakersfield RMP and Record of Decision. Once the RMP is approved, the Bakersfield Field Office will begin its implementation.